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Israel: Criticism of Begin Peace Proposals

Leaders of the opposition Labor Party are stepping up their attacks on Prime Minister Begin's management of peace negotiations with Egypt. They believe Begin has blundered badly and left himself politically vulnerable. Several moderate leaders of the Democratic Movement for Change (DMC), the largest party in the government after Begin's Likud, share this sentiment, but thus far have been unable to influence the DMC's more phlegmatic senior leadership.

Neither Labor criticism nor the maneuvering of DMC doves is likely to alter Begin's stance or appreciably affect public opinion. The emergence of a moderate, broader based "peace movement," however, could generate the kind of public debate on peace issues that thus far has been lacking.

Perhaps 25,000 Israelis, mainly middle-class Ashkenazi Jews of European origin sympathetic to Labor and the DMC, demonstrated last week in Tel Aviv in favor of greater government flexibility in seeking to overcome the impasse with the Egyptians. If this or similar movements build up momentum they could have a significant impact in swaying public opinion and strengthening the hand of moderates who favor a more flexible approach to negotiations.

Labor's Critique

Labor leaders have zeroed in on Begin's claim that UN Security Council Resolution 242 does not require Israel to withdraw from parts of the occupied West Bank, an assertion that they believe has:

- Fatally undermined prospects for progress in peace talks.
- Needlessly strained relations with the United States.

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-- Further damaged Israel's declining international image as a good faith bargainer.

During a Knesset debate last week on the government's peace proposals, Labor Party Chairman Shimon Peres criticized Begin's views on the West Bank. Peres emphasized his belief that there is a national consensus for territorial concessions there, that past Labor-led governments had interpreted Resolution 242 as committing Israel to some form of withdrawal from the West Bank, and that Begin could not unilaterally change this position. Peres further claimed that unless Begin affirms his readiness to make territorial concessions, it will be impossible to reach a peace agreement with Egypt. Peres also reiterated at length past Labor criticisms of the government's mismanagement of Israeli settlement activity in the occupied territories while peace talks were under way.

The net effect of these mistakes, Peres stressed, was to damage "the credibility of the government domestically and abroad at an unbelievable speed and breadth" and open "a wide and unnecessary front with the United States on the wrong subject and at the wrong time." Former Foreign Minister Abba Eban and other high-ranking Labor figures echoed Peres' criticisms.

The Labor Party leadership bureau, made up of current and former party leaders, subsequently voted to propose to the party central committee a resolution stating that the Begin government does not deserve the nation's trust and peace negotiations must be conducted according to Labor's interpretation of Resolution 242.

Split in the DMC

Several of the DMC's 15-member Knesset contingent have also become restless with Begin's foreign policy leadership. Mordechai Wirshubski and David Golomb, two of the more moderate DMC deputies, heatedly criticized Begin's reinterpretation of Resolution 242 and the government's confused handling of Israeli settlements during the Knesset debate last week. Seven DMC deputies abstained on a coalition resolution supporting the government's peace program. Shmuel Toledano, another moderate, recently claimed that nearly half of the party's Knesset representation favored dropping out of the government.

Their disaffection, however, is not shared by party head and Deputy Prime Minister Yigael Yadin. The party's three other cabinet ministers, Justice Minister Shmuel Tamir, Transportation Minister Meir Amit, and Labor Minister Israel Katz, similarly give no indication that they agree with the moderates' complaints. Even Amnon Rubenstein, leader of the party's "moderate wing," is cool toward the idea of withdrawal from the government at the present time.

These officials seem determined to hold onto their cabinet portfolios and other positions of influence. To this end, they appear willing to tolerate Begin's negotiating stance and, in Yadin's case, even to defend it. They reportedly believe that they can best make their influence felt by joining with other cabinet moderates to support Defense Minister Weizman's efforts to soften Begin's negotiating tactics and to keep alive direct peace negotiations with the Egyptians. Defecting from the coalition, in their view, should be considered only if it becomes clear that their strategy to influence Begin has failed.

Yadin went out of his way at a recent session of the DMC's Knesset faction to support Begin's position on the West Bank and to refute the moderates' calls for defection. Although aware that Begin rejects the application of Resolution 242 to West Bank withdrawals, Yadin nevertheless claimed the opposite and asserted that US criticisms of Begin's stance were groundless. Yadin stressed that his party's differences with Begin were only "tactical." The DMC's ruling council later adopted without dissent a resolution supporting the government's peace plan upon Yadin's recommendation that it was the best proposal "under present circumstances."

Amnon Rubenstein recently has supported Begin's peace strategy as a "fair basis" for negotiations, although he has continued to criticize Begin's handling of the settlements issue. Rubenstein has even asserted that the DMC could use its "considerable strength" in the cabinet to moderate government policy.

[redacted] Rubenstein [redacted] along with other moderates, nearly bolted the party earlier this year. As their price for remaining in the party, Rubenstein and his colleagues were conceded a larger representation in party organizations and Knesset committees.

Rubenstein may perceive this bargain as opening the way for greater influence by party moderates over party affairs and even within the government. Rubenstein and other Shinui devotees are reportedly trying to rally support for their candidates to the party council, for which membership elections are scheduled this summer. If they significantly increase their representation on the council, these moderates aim to encourage other party leaders to join them in threatening to leave the government. They apparently believe this tactic--if backed by a majority on the council and if employed at the right time--could force Likud and the other coalition members to pay greater deference to the DMC's views.

Despite the doves' calculations, such a threat seems unlikely of itself to bring about changes in government policy. Even if the DMC did withdraw, Begin would still command a majority, albeit a narrow one, in parliament. [redacted]